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### **“These religions are no good—they’re nothing but idol worship”**

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# ***“These religions are no good—they’re nothing but idol worship”:*** **Misrepresentation of religion in Religious Education at school in Malawi and Ghana**

## **Abstract**

This article draws data from two complementary studies in sub-Saharan Africa to highlight the problem of religious misrepresentation in (multi-faith) Religious Education (RE) at school in Malawi and Ghana. Employing Michael Apples’ conception of selective tradition, the article is critical of the confrontational disputation inherent in the RE in the two countries. The misrepresentation is analysed under themes related to classroom discourse and the nature of religion. It argues that RE could actually be counter-productive and thus end up misrepresenting religions instead of promoting them. Unless there is a radical shift in the areas identified, the subject will continue to present a distorted picture of religion and thus fail in its civic responsibility as a curriculum area that is perhaps best placed to inculcate pro-social values towards citizenship in a world of religious diversity.

**Keywords:** Religion; misrepresentation; citizenship; multi-faith RE, sub-Saharan Africa

## **Introduction**

How schools in sub-Saharan Africa engage with religious pluralisation and the resultant misrepresentation of religion in classroom discourse in Religious Education (RE) is an issue that so far, if at all, has received little attention in the discourse. The present article investigates the findings of a comparative research study in Malawi and Ghana to understand how and why misrepresentation of religion in RE occurs. It provides initial thoughts on the need for teaching and learning to create opportunities in the classroom that foster a better understanding of religious diversity by inculcating pro-social values towards citizenship. Importantly, in today’s pluralist dispensation a reconstructed positive learning experience of religion is necessary given the increasing religiously fuelled conflicts and fundamentalist incidents being experienced the world over (Bayim 2015; Svensson 2007). In this connection, religious proficiency is needed if people, and indeed schools, are to become adept in their interaction with people from minority religions towards the promotion of intercultural understanding as also a means to counter and challenge extremism in whatever form this may be manifested (Ezzani and Brooks 2015; van Bromseen 2016).

Unfortunately, however, schools have been at times complicit in the abuse of religious freedom, leading the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) to champion the condemnation of religious indoctrination, religious monism, and coercive RE programmes (UNCHR 2011). It is worth noting that the dual global concern of religious liberty and reduction of religious conflict has been a key impetus for renewed interest in RE regarding how religions are represented in the curriculum and in everyday classroom practice (see Jackson 2016). In sub-Saharan Africa, where one religion (i.e., Christianity) has the “most enduring impact on people’s socio-religious lifeworld” (Matemba 2011a, 329), the study of ‘other’ religions and how this should be best done while recognising the primacy of Christianity in RE are protracted issues that have not been fully resolved (see Matemba 2009; Ndlovu 2014; Ntho-Ntho and Nieuwenhuis 2016). Working towards a greater insight into religious misrepresentation is useful in unearthing taken-for-granted assumptions that hamper the effectiveness of RE in fostering a better understanding of religious diversity. Writing from a German perspective, Wofram Weisse suggests the urgent “need to map out educational strategies to recognize each other and to learn from each other, rather than perpetuate divisions” (Weisse 2007, quoting Ricoeur, 5-6). However, as

reported in this article, our comparative study of Malawi and Ghana would indicate that unless there is a radical shift regarding how religion is mis/represented in classroom discourse at school in sub-Saharan Africa, RE will continue to present a distorted picture of religion, and therefore fail in its civic responsibility as a curriculum area best positioned to inculcate pro-social values towards citizenship in a world of religious diversity.

## **Background**

### ***“Selective tradition” as analytical framework***

Michael Apple’s theory of *selective tradition* provides an appropriate analytical framework for understanding how the misrepresentation of religion in RE occurs, particularly in the two countries we studied (e.g., Malawi and Ghana). Apple explains that contrary to the perception that education is always a common good, knowledge is deeply implicated in the messy politics of culture (Apple 2000). As Luke *et al* (2013) also comment regarding the curriculum, Apple’s selective tradition highlights curricula that are “fraught with exclusions, with omissions and silences” (157). Putting this differently, Dimitriadis adds that for Apple, “the school curriculum reflects only certain kinds of knowledge and not others” (Dimitriadis 2010, 461). Apple argues against the erroneous perception that official knowledge in education, as it appears in textbooks and classroom practice, is neutral and unbiased (Apple 2004). School texts and classroom discourse are the product of someone’s selection or some group’s idea of *legitimate* knowledge, a process that arises out of cultural, political and economic tensions, conflicts and compromises that organise and disorganise people (Apple 2000). In the end, “what counts as legitimate knowledge is the result of complex power relations and struggles among identifiable class, race, gender, and religious groups” (Apple 2000, 181). Consequently, selective tradition arises out of the need by powerful groups and social movements to legitimize their knowledge in order to increase their power in the social arena. Also embedded in this process are ideological interests that further influence not only what knowledge but also whose knowledge is selected for study (Apple 2002).

Beyond the official curriculum, Apple keenly observes that teachers constantly make “selections” with respect to the choices of what to teach, when to teach, how much to teach and what to use to teach (Apple 2000). Rooted in such decisions to include and exclude lies thought-provoking questions that largely remain subjectively answered. Legitimate queries arise such as: What should count as knowledge? Whose knowledge should be made official? Whose knowledge is exempted? Whose knowledge is taught? Why is it taught in a particular way to a particular group of people? Who should control knowledge? (Apple 2004). Therefore, every piece of curriculum (text, instruction, pedagogy) gives rise to decisions to select or not to select content for enactment in classrooms (Apple 2004). As Apple further explains, even the form in which the curriculum is presented involves decisions, such as those that subjugate specific groups, through the twisting, massaging and removal of facts (Apple 2004). Hence, it is not just “*what* knowledge is [perhaps] most worth” but rather “*whose* knowledge is of most worth” (Apple and Christian-Smith 1991, 1, emphasis supplied). Apple’s conception of selective tradition emphasizes “enfranchis[ation] of one group’s cultural capital” and, by implication, demonization of another (Apple and Christian-Smith 1991, 5). The relevance of Apple’s selective tradition is quite striking in light of the issues described in this article. As we show in later sections, multi-faith curricula in Malawi and Ghana are embroiled in selectivity from development through enactment, the consequence of which is the legitimization of some religions and de-legitimization of others.

### ***Representation of religion in education as conceptualised in research***

Post-confessional scholarship in RE places greater emphasis on the need for the contemporary classroom to take account of religious diversity and where the learning environment helps learners

not only recognize the religious ‘other’, or none, but also ask critical questions (Conroy *et al.* 2013; Ter Avest *et al.* 2008). Following the unprecedented political developments towards democratisation from the 1990s onwards and other push-factors such as immigration, pluralisation and liberal educational policies, to date, research in RE in sub-Saharan Africa has mainly focused on the different ways countries (e.g., Ghana, Malawi, Botswana, Kenya, Botswana, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Uganda and South Africa) have reformed the RE curriculum (see Matemba 2005; 2009; Addai-Mununkum 2014; Ndlovu 2014; Carmody 2003; Mwesigwa 2009; Kasomo 2011; Chidester 2003; Bayim 2015). Extant scholarship in sub-Saharan Africa has highlighted not only important nuances from country to country but also the extent to which policy-borrowing has been a common feature of these reforms. Owing to the micro-politics of RE, these reforms have attracted support and opposition in equal measure, resulting in some cases of RE taking on a particularist approach, for example, different types of RE offered in the national curriculum with the choice of which curriculum to teach left at the discretion of parents or schools (Matemba 2009; 2013).

A survey of religion in sub-Saharan Africa by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2010) highlights the dominance of Christianity and Islam and the marginalisation of Indigenous African Religions (AIR) (Lugo and Cooperman 2010) in socio-cultural and political life. In that context, AIR is perceived in pre-modern terms, for example, “as an obstacle to the Christian faith” (Matemba 2011a, 339). Arguing within the framework of Religious Rights and Freedoms inherent in national constitutions that have emerged since the onset of political democratisation in the 1990s, in South Africa, scholars such as Nokuzola Mndende are critical of how, for example, media organisations misrepresent or underrepresent what she calls “her religious heritage” (i.e., AIR). She calls for special protection within the law in order to preserve the integrity and survival of marginalised religious communities (Mndende, 1998). Rosalind Hackeet argues that the ostracisation of AIR should be understood as a consequence of the powerful discourse of “demonism and Satanism” prevalent in mainline religious traditions such as Islam and Christianity and which advocates violent condemnation of competing religious ‘others’, in particular AIR (Hackeet 2003). It is not uncommon to read about such concerns raised about religious representation in the public square.

During the last couple of decades, scholars in Western countries, predominantly the UK, have reflected on how religion is represented in education in general and in RE in particular. In this context, the works of Philip Barnes, Dan Moulin, Lynn Revell and Robert Jackson are worth highlighting. In his article “Misrepresentation of Religion in Modern British (Religious) Education,” Philip Barnes is critical of contemporary British RE because, according to him, the incessant need to commend itself to the social aims of education, such as reducing prejudice and promoting religious pluralism, has actually misrepresented the nature of religion (Barnes 2006). For Barnes, the quest to present religions as equal and complementary paths to religious fulfilment contradicts the lived experiences of students who profess the self-understanding of, and highlight the doctrinal logic of, their faiths. Barnes argues that the very nature of religions means that they do not just differ but they are fundamentally different, and hence, attempts at epistemological humility (also that there exist many equally valid and authentic ways to salvation) required of religious people in classroom discourse is just a contradiction of theological reality (Barnes 2006). Thus, the phenomenological approach to RE actually leads to a misrepresentation of the reality of religion. Controversially, he also counters the notion (at least in the UK) perpetuated in the discourse around multi-faith RE that acquaintance with religious minorities in the classroom will by itself reduce religious prejudice (Barnes 2006).

Dan Moulin’s fascinating study reveals that ‘religious minorities’ in British High Schools believe that their peers are intolerant of their faiths or treat them as weird people (Moulin 2011).

Consequently, a number of these religious minorities prefer not to disclose their religious identities for fear of being ridiculed, a development that negatively impacts teaching strategies that rely on students sharing their religious views during lessons (Moulin 2011). Drawing from the field of psychology, Moulin argues that children are conceptually incapable of adopting a viewpoint contrary to their own because their cognitive development would not have reached a stage of maturity where they could adopt a third person perspective. In his contribution to the discourse, Liam Gearon observes that the secularisation of European civil religion has diluted religion in order to give it a secular appeal (Gearon 2012). He makes the point that European RE promotes a kind of civil religion that seeks to promote citizenship, democracy and human rights (Gearon 2012). He observes that the quest to broaden RE to make it more inclusive runs the risk of misrepresenting religion, revealing that while children might express tolerance in classroom discussion, such attitude is not always replicated in their daily lives (Gearon 2012).

In her book *Islam and Education* (Revell 2012), Lynn Revell provides interesting insights regarding how Islam is misrepresented in RE classrooms in the UK. She argues that while RE textbooks present Islam and its adherents in a positive way, there is a glaring omission and failure to contextualise the ‘negative’ portrayal of Islam in the narratives outside education (see also Hussain 2012). Putting this differently, as others have also observed, school textbooks present “safe notions of Islam, devoid of any of the raw realities of life as a Muslim in the contemporary world” (Parker 2013, 126), and yet this ‘unreal’ portrayal conflicts with how children encounter Muslims through popular media and other stereotypes (Hussain 2012). Importantly, Revell explains how such representation of Islam in classroom discourse through textbooks is perpetuated, when it should be interrogated and challenged.

In his extensive body of scholarly work, Robert Jackson gives serious attention to the ways multicultural classrooms in Britain engage with religions (Jackson 1997). Jackson argues that the absence of a critical analysis of religions and the cultures that underpin them leads to a “representation of religious traditions which essentialises them, playing down their internal diversity, and which assumes a ‘closed’ view of cultures” (Jackson 1995, 272). Jackson is critical of approaches that “...stereotype religions’ and offer a ‘simplistic representation of the religion/culture relationship’ (Jackson 2011, 191). Rather, he advocates approaches that take account of the diversity between and within religions in exploring different ways of understanding the complexity of religion as a cultural phenomenon (see also Jackson 2016). Jackson makes the important point that how religions are represented is an issue that relates to the question of power and thus highlights an on-going imbalance of power where a politically and culturally dominant groups tend to define weaker and less-assertive groups (Jackson 1997).

To deal effectively with the complex nature of religion, Jackson suggests the importance of having teaching in RE start with the questions and concerns that learners have provided. Key to this is the need to consider how the three key inter-related concepts of *representation*, *interpretation* and *reflexivity* are relevant in the exploration of religious phenomena in the classroom (see Jackson 1997; Jackson 2011). Drawing on the interpretive approach, which he developed, Jackson identifies a three-level model to explain the issue of representation in RE: (a) recognising the character of religions and how this can be enriched by drawing on interdisciplinary studies and the experience of fieldwork; (b) recognising religions as dynamic, with scope for the content to be negotiated and contested; and (c) exercising caution and at times avoiding projecting assumptions from one religious tradition to another (Jackson 1997, 108-110).

Although the work of Barnes, Moulin, Revell and Jackson described above is presented within a European/Western context, the issues they reveal provide important lessons on how schools (school leaders, teachers and pupils) engage with religious diversity and the extent to which such engagement engenders religious understanding or misunderstanding at a time when in parts of the

African continent (e.g., Nigeria and Somalia) religious fundamentalism is a serious threat to social cohesion and political democratisation (see Bayim 2015; Mwangi 2012). As this article highlights, the misrepresentation of religion could be explained owing to a pervasive culture of selection involving exclusion, inclusion and ‘misclusion’ (included but misrepresented) that is exacerbated by cultural politics, teachers’ ideology, *pillarization* of schools (as in the Netherlands, where schools operate separately due to religious particularities (Ter Avest *et al.* 2008)) and the dominance of Church schools that have traditionally sought to outclass other religions in education (see Ibrahim 1991; Mwesigwa 2009).

### Religious Education in Malawi and Ghana – an overview

A comparative approach is appropriate in this study because of the similarities and differences that exist between Malawi and Ghana regarding national cultures, ways of learning, religious demography, political democratisation and the nature of curriculum reforms towards multi-faith RE. The emergence of multiparty politics in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s, among other factors, necessitated educational reforms as a way to attune teaching and learning with the ethos and expectations of a new political and social order (Chisholm and Leyendecker 2008). For RE, these reforms have engendered a paradigm shift in countries such as Malawi (population 17 million) and Ghana (population 26 million), in which the material content and pedagogy of RE have changed from Bible-based parochialism to multi-faith education in consonance with the ideals of democratic education in the public square (Barnes 2006). Economically, both Malawi and Ghana are classified as third world countries and commit more than one-quarter of their national budget to education: 31% and 32% in Ghana and Malawi, respectively (Government of Ghana 2012; Malawi Government 2008).

Table 1. Religious demography in Malawi and Ghana

Malawi (2008)		Ghana (2010)	
Christianity	82.6%	Christianity	71.2%
Catholic		Catholic	
Presbyterian		Methodist	
Anglican		Anglican	
Baptist		Mennonites	
Evangelical		Presbyterians	
Seventh-day Adventist		Lutherans	
		Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints	
		Seventh-day Adventist	
		Pentecostal	
		Baptist	
		Society of Friends	
Islam	13.0%	Islam	17.6%
Sunni (Qadriya and Sukutu)		Ahlussuna	
Ahmadiyya		Tijanis	
		Ahmadis	
		Shi’a	
		Zetahil	
Other Religions	1.9%	Other Religions	0.8%
Buddhism		Hinduism	
Hinduism		Rastafarianism	
Sikhism		Shintoism	
Baha’i Faith		Eckankar	
Judaism		Buddhism	
Rastafarianism		Baha’i Faith	
AIR		Judaism	
		Hare Krishna	
		Devine Light Mission	
		Ninchiren Shoshu Soka Gakkai	
		Sri Sathya Sai Baba Sera	
		Sat Sang	
No religion	2.5%	AIR	5.2%
		No Religion	5.2%

Total	100%	100%
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Source: (Government of Ghana 2012; Malawi Government 2008).

As evidenced in Table 1, although Ghana and Malawi are geographically separate (Malawi in South-East Central Africa and Ghana in West Africa), the two countries have a similar history of British colonisation and, crucially, intense Christian missionary activities, including educational work (see Gallego and Woodberry 2010). In terms of religious demography (Table 1), there are other striking similarities that can be drawn between Malawi and Ghana, for example, the continued relevance of religion (unlike in ‘secular’ Europe) for people’s socio-cultural lifeworld, including the dominant presence of Christianity and the assertiveness of Islam (see Meyer 2004). As in most Western countries (see Maussen and Vermeulen 2014), in both Malawi and Ghana, freedom of religion and non-discrimination are guaranteed in the constitution and protected by law. Related to RE are other points of comparison between the two countries that are worth noting. Since missionary times in both countries, RE in schools has had an explicit Christian agenda of proselytisation. However, beginning in the 1990s attempts were made to replace Christian RE with multi-faith RE (Ghana 1994 and Malawi 1998 in primary and 2000 in junior secondary), although with slightly different outcomes of success and failure, mainly due to stakeholder disputation and resistance to curriculum changes (see Kudadjie 1996; Matemba 2009).

In Malawi, the introduction of multi-faith RE (modelled on Botswana’s 1996 RE curriculum (see Matemba 2005)) was a direct response to the country’s transition from a one-party dictatorship (1964-1993) to a multi-party democracy since 1994 (Ihonvbere 1997) as a way to help students appreciate the value of living in a pluralist society and, where necessary, help them deal with the multiple challenges that political and religious pluralism might engender for society (Malawi Government 1998). The initial stages of these reforms in RE faced stakeholder resistance, mainly by the influential Christian block. Christian leaders, for example, expressed the view that the inclusion of Islam as a religion of study in RE—at a time the country’s first democratically elected president was a Muslim—was a political ploy to Islamise the country, an accusation vehemently denied by the Office of the President and Cabinet (Matemba, 2009). As a compromise to what turned out to be an intractable curriculum problem among the various stakeholders (parents, Christian leaders, government officials and Muslim leaders), the government implemented a *dual* curriculum arrangement in the junior secondary (JC) school sector, allowing both multi-faith RE and existing Bible Knowledge (BK) to be offered simultaneously in schools, with choice given to individual schools regarding which programme to teach (Matemba 2009). In practice, however, the popularity of BK vis-à-vis multi-faith RE has not diminished, in part on the account that key stakeholders in education (i.e., Churches and parents) prefer BK because Malawi is a ‘Christian’ country (Matemba, 2011b). Inevitably, while the number of students studying BK remains high (e.g., 63759 in 2006 and 78377 in 2013), the number of those studying multi-faith RE is small and declining (e.g., 1436 in 2006 and 247 in 2013) (MANEB 2017). Why multi-faith RE in Malawi is in this predicament is an issue requiring separate investigation, although from extant evidence we can make out the following issues, in part concerning the lack of: (a) teachers’ subject knowledge of different religions, (b) pedagogical knowhow of inclusive approaches, (c) in-service training for teachers and (d) specialist teachers in multi-faith RE in schools (see Matemba 2011a).

As shown in Table 2, Ghana’s move towards the introduction of multi-faith RE was gradual, emanating from the 1924 Guggisberg educational reform, with greater impetus observed in 1994. This progressive change was generally welcomed, save for some subdued complaints by Christian, Muslim and African religious leaders at different times about parts of the curriculum (Addai-Mununkum 2014). Some Christians and Muslims have protested the inclusion of content related to

AIR in the subject, suggesting that participatory methods of teaching AIR where students acted out such practices as pouring libations (religious practice involving prayer and pouring drinks, mostly alcohol, on the ground amidst recitation for well-wishes to friends and family and curse for enemies) could make their children demon-possessed (Kudadjie, 1996). Relatedly, some elders of Afrikania Mission (a spiritual movement advocating for the abandonment of western religions and promotion of AIR) have called for the expunging of religion from the curriculum altogether because they believe AIR is misrepresented, and the subject Religious and Moral Education (RME) is being used as a tool for the perpetuation of foreign ideologies (Thomas 2012).

In Ghana, RE is a compulsory part of the curriculum for grades one through nine. It includes lessons on Christianity, Islam and AIR, and it is structured to provide moral education so as to make students into responsible adults able to make sound decisions in today's changing world (Anti *et al.* 2002). In Malawi, RE is a core subject in primary schools but an elective subject in the junior and secondary school sectors. In the primary and junior secondary sectors, the RME offered covers "... multi-faith instruction, cutting across the three major religions of Malawi, namely, Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religions" (Malawi Government 1998, iv). However, due to stakeholder contestation and demand, the historical BK curriculum continues to be offered in junior secondary schools, creating a dual syllabus arrangement in which two different types of RE (i.e., multi-faith RE and BK) are offered simultaneously in the curriculum, with the choice of which subject to study left at the discretion of schools, students and parents (Matemba 2009).

Table 2. History of Religious Education in Malawi and Ghana

Malawi	Ghana
1873/4 Establishment of mission schools. Biblical literacy foundation of school curriculum	1529 Establishment of Castle Schools. Biblical Literacy foundation of school curriculum
1929 Common BK syllabus introduced, ending practice of denominational-based BK in schools.	1924 Government promulgates 14 Principles of Education RE a key area in the new principles (P 9)
1948 Malawi's first secondary school established and BK compulsory subject.	Principle discouraged RE as indoctrination.
1974 Efforts by Churches to adopt East African BK syllabus ('Developing in Christ') fails to win government support. Schools continued to use 1920s syllabus.	1961 Promulgation of Education Act 1961 RI removed from list of compulsory subjects Schools allowed to implement own forms of RE.
1982 First revision of BK after independence in 1964. In secondary schools, BK made elective for the first time.	Opt-out option for RE if parents object
1991 In primary schools, BK replaced with RME and with no cases of stakeholder contestation.	1987 Implementation of New Educational Reform Cultural Studies introduced incorporating issues from Christianity, Islam and IR.
1994 First Muslim president elected after 30 years of dictatorship rule by self-styled life president, a Christian. Multi-faith RE in all school sectors gains momentum	More focus on traditional culture in new subject The reform opposed mainly by Christian parents
2000 BK in secondary schools replaced with RME. Contestation by Church leaders against RME. Support of RME by Moslem leaders and parents. RE in secondary schools suspended. National examination in RE suspended.	1994 Cultural Studies rebranded as RME
2001 Dual syllabus (BK and RME) in junior secondary.	2002 Educational Reform undertaken. RME removed due to curriculum overload. Religious groups led protests to bring RME.
2006 Revised BK developed for secondary schools. Dual syllabus arrangement in junior secondary. Lack of resources preventing rolling out of revised BK.	President issued an executive fiat (i.e., ordering the Ministry of Education to reintroduce RME in the Curriculum) to reintroduce RME

Key: Religious Instruction (RI), Bible Knowledge (BK), Religious and Moral Education (RME), Religious Education (RE)

In 2006, Malawi again revised the secondary school BK curriculum (i.e., junior and senior secondary), with its content covering themes such as the Bible, God in the Old Testament and New Testament, Christian beliefs, Christian values, Christian practices, relationship between the Old and New Testaments and Christian approaches to contemporary issues (Malawi Government). However, due to lack of funds, the Ministry of Education has not to this day rolled out the revised programmes to schools (Matemba 2013). Consequently, in the secondary school sector, the 'classic' form of BK—largely unchanged since missionary times—continues to be taught: in



junior secondary, it is based on stories, incidents, personalities and anecdotes in the Old and New Testaments ( Malawi Government 1982a); and in senior secondary, it is based on an extensive study of the entire books of Luke, the Acts of the Apostles and Isaiah (Malawi Government 1982b). For our purposes, the Malawi study focused on the RME offered in the junior secondary curriculum.

In both countries, the multi-faith RE curriculum is structured to expose students to the belief and value systems of Christians, Muslims and adherents of AIR. While reference is occasionally made to scriptures (i.e., Bible and Qur'an), it is sparsely done, placing more emphasis on the similarities as well as the differences in the value systems of the three religions. For AIR, the curricula in both Malawi and Ghana take a similar approach, projecting a singular African Religion. It supports the view that the core belief system of IR is similar in all of the African Religions regardless of the local contextual differences (see Beyers 2010). In a typical case of policy-borrowing, developments towards multi-faith RE in countries such as Malawi have followed the lead of Zambia (1984) and Ghana (1994), two countries first to introduce multi-faith RE in sub-Saharan Africa (Carmody 2003; Kudadjie 1996). Curiously, in Malawi and Ghana, the multi-faith RE curricula in use have adopted similar selective approaches that include the study of only three religions: Christianity, Islam and AIR. While the two governments should be lauded for taking the bold step to introduce an inclusive, though somewhat limited, RE programme (when previously only Christian RE was taught), we are critical about the selective design that mandates schools to focus on only three religions and ignore many other religions (Ghana Education Service 2008; Malawi Government 1998). Evidently, multi-faith RE in the two countries does not reflect the religious demographic, because only three religions are pre-selected for and thus inevitably ignore other religions present, such as Baha'i Faith, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Eckankar and Rastafarianism (see Table 1).

The simultaneous uniformity and difference pertaining to the context in which RE exists in Malawi and Ghana also interests us, as we examine the problem of religious misrepresentation in RE. In places such as Malawi and Ghana, where the confessional (Christian) tradition has been dominant in RE since missionary times (see Addai-Mununkum 2014; Matemba 2009), we suggest that unless there is a radical shift in the areas of curriculum philosophy and pedagogy, for example, the subject will continue to present a distorted picture of religion and thus fail in its civic responsibility as a curriculum area that is perhaps best placed to inculcate pro-social values towards citizenship in a world of religious diversity. Here, we are guided by our working definition of religious misrepresentation as a phenomenon in curriculum and classroom discourse in which religion is presented or taught about in a way that it loses its essence and/or becomes displeasing to adherents of a particular religion (see, for example, Gates 2013). Such a distortion also arises from a framing of RE dominated by one religion (i.e., Christianity) in ways that inevitably perceives other religions as inferior (Cooling 2013, 341).

## **Methods of study**

This article draws on research findings from two complementary studies from Malawi (2011) and Ghana (2014). In undertaking the study, we used qualitative research methods involving interviews, observations, focus group discussions, and data from documents and textbooks. For interviews and focus groups, we used the phenomenological approach as a “coherent methodology” (Erricker 1999, 76) so that the researchers could gain, as far as possible, an understanding of religions at school in multi-faith RE. To counteract the inherent weaknesses of the phenomenological approach (i.e., researcher subjectivity and hermeneutical naivety due to its descriptiveness) and ensure data trustworthiness, the researchers used multiple data sources (Silverman 2009). Schools and participants in the study were selected based on a purposive

sampling technique, namely, the deliberate choice of informants due to the qualities the informant possesses (Creswell *et al.* 2002).

In Malawi, the research locations were wide-ranging and included school visits to 11 schools, four of which were located in one district (Mangochi), considered the official headquarters of Malawi's Muslims. The study in Ghana involved six public schools located in rural and urban communities. In Ghana, the schools were purposefully selected based on their unique characteristics – two schools with a Christian majority, two with a Muslim majority and the remaining two with a somewhat even distribution of Christians Muslims and other minority religions. We collected data from three different sources (data triangulation) and in that way generated 'thick' data for the study: (a) focus group discussions with secondary students, (b) individual interviews with a number of stakeholders selected because they have lived the experience of RE through their involvement or interest in the subject (Silverman 2009) and finally, document analysis.

Table 3. Study participants: focus group discussions with secondary school students

Malawi Focus Groups (MFG): <i>N</i> =3		Ghana Focus Groups (GFG): <i>N</i> =6	
MFG 1	11	GFG 1	10
MFG 2	12	GFG 3	15
MFG 3	10	GFG 3	12
N/A	N/A	GFG 4	14
N/A	N/A	GFG 5	11
N/A	N/A	GFG 6	10
Total	33		72

In both countries, we conducted focus group discussions (Table 3) with students in selected secondary schools. The focus groups were self-selected by the schools, which may explain the larger-than-usual samples in each of the focus groups the researchers interacted with. For example, 10 was the smallest group and 15 the largest. By the request of the researchers, the focus groups had a mix of boys and girls. In Malawi, the focus groups were drawn from three schools (*N*=3), while in Ghana, we conducted six focus group (*N*=6) discussions from six schools. In total, the number of students involved in focus group discussions was 105 (33 in Malawi and 72 in Ghana), comprising nine individual focus groups: 3 in Malawi and 6 in Ghana. Here, we were interested not in the number of respondents in the groups per se but rather in the number of groups themselves, because we wanted to capture each group's collective responses to the issues and questions we posed (Menter *et al.* 2012).

The focus group discussions aimed at soliciting their personal views on religious pluralism, their schools' religious climates, classroom discourse on religion and their opinions about religions they were not affiliated with—the so-called other religion. We asked open-ended questions, and students gave their responses as and when they had something to say. Following the principles of deliberative pedagogy (Hess, 2008), students agreed to ground rules for discussion prior to the start of all deliberations. Some of these included respecting other people's opinion whether one agreed or not, allowing others to show disagreement with one's position, taking turns to make statements and issues about confidentiality. The discussion at each school lasted approximately 45 minutes. As discussion facilitators, we posed questions and regulated the flow of discussion. At certain times, we raised counter arguments when the discussion was turning unidirectional and tried to play "the devil's advocate" for voices that were not represented.

Secondly, as indicated in Table 4 we conducted *narrative-type* face to face interviews with 39 (*N*=39) and 32 (*N*=32) participants in Malawi and Ghana, respectively. The interviews captured

insights from Ministry of Education officials, head teachers, RE teachers, university lecturers in RE, representatives of a teachers' union, parents on school boards, representatives of religious organisations and students. Where relevant, interviews with key stakeholders were conducted at places of their choice, usually where they worked. In both countries, interviews with selected students ( $N=8$ ) followed after focus group discussions. We used such interviews to offer an opportunity for the student to voice the concerns they had that they could not share in the group. Similarly, students who were less vocal were also interviewed individually to provide a less intimidating environment for them to express their thoughts.

Table 4. Study participants: interviews with key stakeholders

	Malawi ( $N=39$ )	Ghana ( $N=32$ )
Education officials	3	2
Religious leaders	4	3
Head teachers	9	6
University Lecturers	4	6
Representative of teacher's union	1	0
Parents	2	2
Teachers	13	8
Students	3	5
Total	39	32

In both studies, the focus group discussions and interviews were audio-recorded (with signed consent). Each of the interviews and focus group discussions lasted not more than one-and-a-half hours. To preserve the participants' anonymity in the interviews and focus group discussions, unidentifiable codes and, in some cases, pseudonyms were used. Where complete anonymity was not possible to maintain, we applied the principle of limited anonymity (van den Hoonaard 2003). For the focus group discussions, we used anonymous codes such as MFG 2 (Malawi Focus Groups) or GFG 5 (Ghana Focus Groups), while for interviews we used unidentifiable descriptions such as Malawi teacher 9, Ghana teacher 7, Malawi Muslim leader 1 and so on. Furthermore, to better understand the policy and curriculum context in both countries, we also examined a number of documents such as official reports, policy papers, minutes of official meetings, professional reports and syllabus and curriculum guidelines, including RE school textbooks and student exercise books.

Table 5: Thematic map tables of data collected

Malawi	Ghana
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selective multi-faith RE curriculum focusing on three religions: Christianity, Islam and AIR</li> <li>• Absence of in-service/reskilling training</li> <li>• Teachers' use of selective Biblical passages as weapon to demonize other religions</li> <li>• Teachers' provocative approaches and demonisation of religion (i.e., Islam and AIR) and religious leaders (i.e., Prophet Mohammed)</li> <li>• Teacher's uneasiness about teaching religions that are 'not mine'</li> <li>• Students and parental anger due to schools' blatant misrepresentation of their religion</li> <li>• RE taught mostly by 'Christian' teachers.</li> <li>• 'Christian' RE teachers' insistent desire to convert students to their religion.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multi-faith RE curriculum based on three religions: Christianity, Islam and AIR</li> <li>• Generally unsympathetic views about others' religions by teachers and students</li> <li>• Teachers' strong views that they have moral authority to teach the 'truth' of their religion.</li> <li>• Strong views by 'Christian' teachers that their religion has 'truth' and other religions are 'false'</li> <li>• Dominance of 'Christian' teachers in RE</li> <li>• Proselytization as default teachers' response to the question of religious 'truth' claims.</li> <li>• Students' adamant defence that their home/family religion has the true religion and others are false religions.</li> <li>• Teachers' apathetic attitude teaching students belonging to religious movements such as Eckankar.</li> </ul>

An inductive analysis of the data from the documents, focus group discussions and face-to-face interviews was conducted involving several heuristic stages in qualitative research (Silverman

2009). To understand the data and ascertain its quality, we listened to each recording several times so that we could properly transcribe the interviews. We then read the interview transcripts and notes compiled from the documents several times, a process that helped us understand the material content of the data. From this iterative process, we were able to identify a number of common issues emerging from the data. After cross-checking these issues against the aims of the research, we were able to recognise patterns and relationships in the data (Ary *et al.* 2006). Using the method of open coding, we identified and coded a number of distinct themes that we considered important in drawing attention to the core criteria for evaluating the misrepresentation of religion in RE in the two countries (Silverman 2009).

From the analysis of the data from the interviews, focus group discussions and relevant document, a number of distinct issues were captured, which we categorized into themes (Table 5). The themes in question coalesced on the following two key issues, which we now report in this section. The first theme concerns the misrepresentation of religions in curriculum enactment, and the second touches on the misrepresentation of the nature of religions. To deal effectively with the first theme, we have divided it into two further sub-themes, viz., teachers' engagement with 'non-normative' religions and misrepresentation of the religious 'other'.

### **Research findings**

In our study, we found that participants in both Malawi and Ghana were fully aware of religious diversity not only in the classroom environment but also in wider society. However, as the findings here illustrate, we found entrenched views both from students and teachers in their failure to recognize the 'religious other', demonization, and expressions of the feeling that their 'home' religion was superior to all others. We make this claim based on our observation of teachers from two fronts: their engagement with non-normative religions and their actions that sought to misrepresent the religious 'other'. As we also observed in our study, the dominance of Christianity has created a classification scheme that legitimizes Christianity as a "normative" religion and all others as "non-normative" religions, hence, our use of the terms.

#### ***Engagement with 'non-normative' religions***

Related to teachers' engagement with *non-normative* religions, we found that in a number of cases, classroom discourse caused consternation and anger among certain religious groups, especially when teachers expressed unsympathetic sentiments against religions they did not consider 'theirs' ( $N=18$  or 86%). In Malawi, a representative of the Muslim community (an Imam) was gravely concerned with the way RE teachers described Islam:

While Muslims accept the Bible, the way Islam is taught concerns us. Regarding our Prophet Muhammad, these teachers say that he was a liar and speak about him in this way, for example, that he died of AIDS – I don't know if this was an exaggeration. This provoked Muslim anger. Muslims came over to us and I advised them that the best thing was to speak with the school concerned (Malawi Muslim leader 1).

While this Imam was cautious that some of the reports about the misrepresentation of Islam could be hyperbolic, data from our research in Ghana contained confessions from teachers that corroborates the fact that some RE teachers misrepresent *non-normative* religions. Such teachers (identifying themselves as Christian Pentecostals) perceived themselves as having a moral responsibility to teach students the Christian "truth". Two such teachers who reported having converted from Islam to Christianity are referred to here as Grace and Amina (pseudonyms). Neither hid their bias, as they echoed their personal commitment to teach students that all religions find their fulfilment in Christianity, as the following dialogue with us iterates.

*Grace:* I teach them according to the syllabus, but I always remind them that I searched the truth and found it in Christianity.

*Researcher:* How would you respond if a student asked you to recommend a religion to them?

*Grace:* I will tell them to pray so that God would reveal to them to join a Christian Church.

*Amina:* Most of the time, they [Muslims] follow us more than we follow them. You know that in the whole Qur'an, the word love is not there? There is something about the Kaaba that takes human flesh. It is all about idol worship... I tell them our forefathers did not get the opportunity we have, so God will forgive them for worshipping idols. But those who live today have no excuse for following Indigenous religion.

In the examples above, Amina and Grace reveal their prejudices and how this influences them to malign Islam and AIR. Statements such as “Kaaba takes human flesh”, “I found the truth in Christianity”, “join a Christian church”, and “we have no excuse to follow AIR” are not only maligning *non-normative* religions but also project Christianity as a superior religion. Apart from factual misrepresentations, such as that Kaaba takes human flesh, here, Amina and Grace misrepresent AIR and Islam as *untrue* religions. We found a similar picture in Malawi, where teachers were accused of saying provocative things about Islam and its revered prophet, Muhammad. A Muslim leader (an Imam) expressed his concern:

The Muslim community takes offense when Christian teachers use provocative approaches about Islam or say things that are offensive to Muslims and Islam. There are those teachers who use selected Biblical texts to criticize Islam or say insensitive things about our prophet. Since children cannot challenge the teacher, they go to their parents and report and then problems start (Malawi Muslim leader 2).

Jackson's interpretative approach cautions against “projecting assumptions from one religious tradition onto another religious traditions” as a way to minimise the misrepresentation of religion in classroom discourse (Jackson 1997, 110). As we found in our study, the effects of such blatant misrepresentations of religions, as in the excerpt captured above, can be very costly. In one Malawian school, we found evidence that Muslim pupils once tore up Bibles in class (given to them by the Gideon's International Society) because the RE teacher had said something they construed as disrespectful to Islam. In another Malawian school, we found that the RE teacher had gone to the police station for protection because Muslim parents and villagers were baying for his blood over what pupils had told their parents the teacher allegedly said about Islam in class, which had upset the children. As we noted earlier in this study, from an educational and professional stand-point, professionally trained teachers have no business worrying whether a religion is true or not, because that kind of discussion has no place in multi-faith RE.

### ***“Demonisation” of the religious ‘other’***

Besides the ‘selected’ *non-normative* religions that are misrepresented (i.e., Islam and AIR), we found evidence that highlighted teachers' lack of understanding of religions outside the three they were familiar with ( $N=15$  or 68%). In fact, they considered religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Rastafarianism and others to be undesirable and demonic. A teacher in Ghana expressed nervousness about teaching students belonging to religions such as Eckankar (which emphasizes “spiritual living”). Her views are as revealing as they are worrying:

I never knew she belonged to the Eckankar. It was her friend who told me, and when I got to know this, to be honest, I was nervous to get close to her. Thankfully, she has graduated, so I don't have to worry anymore (Ghana teacher 3).

Similarly, a self-confessed Christian teacher in Malawi did not consider *non-normative* religions worth studying, as this excerpt reveals:

I do not accept these other religions as worth teaching in our schools, essentially because we Christians desire to convert these people to our religion, and thus, it defeats logic on my part to teach a religion I want children to convert from (Malawi teacher 9).

The selective nature of the multi-faith RE in the two countries has resulted in the misrepresentation of minority religions as ‘undesirable’, and thus, respondents, as in the case of teachers above, saw their role as agents of religious conversion so that students can move away from religious ‘falsehood’ to religious ‘truth’. Evidently, the selective nature of the multi-faith RE curriculum has produced exclusionary practices that explore some religions (Christianity, Islam and AIR) and ignore others, leaving teachers with severe misunderstandings about other religions (James 2014). Expectedly, students admitted to knowing little to nothing about ‘other’ religions practised in the two countries, such as Judaism, Eckankar, Buddhism and Rastafarianism. The few who heard about the existence of these religions held a distorted view of them, in part perpetuated by stereotypes, as the excerpts below illustrate:

The Buddhist religion forces people not to eat meat but only vegetables. This is not good (MFG 1).

God has given us the Bible to follow and since these religions do not follow it, they are satanic religions (GFG 3).

These religions are not any good religions, they are all about idol worship (GFG 6).

What Rastafarians do is smoke *chamba* [marijuana/Indian Hemp]. It will be chaos if government allowed each and every one to practice their faith in such bizarre way (MFG 2).

In Ghana, students in five of the six focus group discussions indicated that they would not accept a teacher of the Rastafarian faith. When we pursued this issue further with one of the students we interviewed, he elaborated that

If this school admits such a teacher, I would drop out...Rasta teachers would only teach us to smoke weed [marijuana] (Ghana Student 3).

It was surprising to us that even with Rastafarianism, a religion that appears to be more widespread in both countries, students misrepresented it as a religion only devoted to the smoking of marijuana. In both interviews and focus group discussions, students described AIR as an act of idol worship to be avoided. So strong were their views on this that they objected to having an indigenous worshipper invited to their classroom as a resource person, and yet they were quite willing to have a Muslim cleric or Church pastor visit their classes. In Malawi, students associated AIR with *Gule Wamkulu* (the ‘big dance’ associated with occultist performances of the Chewa tribal group). Therefore, as ‘Christians’ or ‘Muslims,’ it was anathema to be exposed to the ‘evils’ of such practices because they can corrupt their religious identity (see also Matemba 2013). In Ghana as well, students described AIR mostly in negative terms, as the quotations below demonstrate:

When God was throwing away Lucifer, some of the spirits resided in rocks, trees, et cetera, so if you worship those, you are not worshipping God (GFG 4).

... When God came to this earth, he brought only one religion [Christianity] ... Muhammed brought Islam, and for AIR, somebody just worships an object until it is engulfed with some spirits. God created the human being and all the objects so why should they worship it (GFG 2).

Allah sent his messenger to come to this world and they have brought the true religion [Islam]. Allowing them [AIR worshippers] here would not allow for us to see the true religion. What Allah hates most is to have other gods. He abhors it (GFG 3).

From the excerpts above, students saw AIR as a bad religion, hence the need to convert all those who still believe in it. Crucially, the findings here also confirm Barnes' assertion that students' attitudes (i.e., religious prejudices) do not change even after exposure to religions they are not associated with, essentially because they are unable to abstract themselves from their own faiths (see Barnes 2006).

As the evidence in our research illustrates, misrepresentation of religion in RE in Malawi and Ghana occurs, in part, due to the failure of RE to account for intra-religious diversity and thus present "religions primarily as unified belief systems" (Jackson 1997, 108). This is the result, as we found in our study, of presenting a tainted picture, for example, of Christianity and Islam with distinct homogeneity. This failure to include critical issues such as doctrinal or sectarian differences creates a dilemma for teachers, leading them to misinterpret doctrines of some Churches that come up during class discussion. Teachers in the study belonging to Churches with 'ultra-evangelical' doctrines, such as Seventh-day Adventists, found themselves in such a predicament—for example, Adventists consider Saturday and not Sunday to be the day of congregational worship (see Keller 2004). At an Adventist school in Ghana, one teacher explained her dilemma:

When we get to those parts [Christian day of worship], it is not easy at all. The students want me to take a position, but I try to convince them that all the days are ok if you make it holy (Ghana Teacher 3).

Indeed a group of students at the Adventist school noted above were displeased with their teachers because apparently they did not take a firm position regarding the Sabbath, as can be seen in the excerpt below:

We always argue with our teacher because the Bible says the seventh day is the Sabbath, so there can be only one truth, but our teacher does not agree (Ghana Focus Group 3).

As we found out in the study, part of the problem had to do with the fact that classroom discourse in RE avoided critical discussion and debate of religious issues, especially of those regarded 'controversial'. Teachers revealed that

We only teach historical and not doctrinal Islam. In other words, we teach only for the students to have basic knowledge of Islam so that they can explain that Muslims do this and that without going into the controversial realm of Islamic doctrine and interpretation (Malawi teacher 13).

In teaching religion, we don't go into much detail about denominational differences; we only teach the beliefs that are common to all Christians (Ghana teacher 4).

What is evident in these findings is how classroom discourse is partly constrained by the phenomenological approach on which multi-faith RE in both Malawi and Ghana is premised. This

confirms what other scholars have highlighted, that contemporary RE tends to flatten “out differences and emphasise sameness as a crude application of the phenomenological approach” (see Parker 2013, 126). Among other things, the phenomenological approach focuses on the essence or common dimensions of religion and thus requires an *objective study* of religion where both teachers and learners are expected to suspend their bias and judgment in what is being studied (see Jackson 1997).

### **Discussion and analysis**

Despite the criticism of relativism and reductionism, Robert Jackson’s interpretive approach provides a useful tool not only in understanding why and how misrepresentation of religion in multi-faith RE occurs but, more importantly, what can be done to address the problem (Jackson 1997). The interpretive approach encourages learning to investigate the diversity that exists within religions as well as between them (Jackson 1997). From the findings, another issue to be considered relates to what Jackson’s interpretative approach considers as the failure of teachers and students to recognise religions as dynamic, “with a content and scope which is negotiated and sometimes contested...” (Jackson 1997, 109). Returning to the study, although culturally Malawi and Ghana follow a pluralist agenda in their political and educational policy, classroom discourses clearly failed to account for religious diversity and intra-religious diversity. In almost all cases, our findings indicated that classroom discourses tended to present a theological superiority of Christianity. Despite the democratic aspiration of these countries as places where diversity is celebrated (Hussein 2011; Owusu 1992), in our studies, we observed high levels of intolerance by teachers, students, university lecturers, parents, head teachers and religious leaders ( $N=29$  or 66%) towards those religions they were not members of—although interestingly, almost all the education officials ( $N=4$  or 80%) who took part in the study appeared to express neutral views on the matter (i.e., privileging Christianity vis-à-vis other religions in RE).

For Christianity, and to some extent Islam, doctrinal or sectarian differences can provide a critical understanding of religion, and yet in classroom discourse, these differences were either ignored or smoothed over with general statements about an imagined ‘one’ Christianity or Islam (Kobia 2001). Part of the problem is that the RE curriculum presents a ‘smooth’ and ‘simplistic’ view of religion, and yet we know that religion is *messy* and *contested*, requiring a critical approach if we are to fully understand its impact on students and wider society (see Jackson 2006). What we observe here can be explained in the light of Gearon’s concern that multi-faith RE could result in misrepresentations because discussions attempt to dilute religion in order to give it a secular appeal (Gearon 2012). Barnes also argues that “it is not just that religions differ, [but] that they are different in fundamental ways” (Barnes 2006, 404). Thus, to present Christianity, Islam or indeed any religion as a homogenous belief system is to deny history and dispute an obvious reality. The point is that students know too well the denominational differences that exist. In their communities and popular press, they see sectarian conflicts as various groups within a religion battling each other for ‘lost souls,’ using their understanding of religious doctrine to distinguish themselves from the rest. For RE to deny this reality is no different from miseducation, or worse, having no education at all.

The findings analysed in this study confirm claims by Barnes, Revell, Gearon, Moulin, Jackson and others that RE curricula misrepresent the very nature of religion in seeking to achieve the social and civic aims of liberal education. The exclusion of religions, the idiosyncratic bias of teachers and students, and the failure to account for intra-religious diversity contribute to the misrepresentation of what counts as a valid religion. Students are presented with half-truths of the nature of religion and a polished picture of Christianity and Islam as homogeneous singular religions without denominational differences. In both countries, the decision by policy makers to



exclude some religions from the curriculum could be seen in the light of Apple's selective tradition (Apple 2004). Influenced by the politics of culture, constrained by factors such as time allotment, and considering that there are innumerable religions in the world, national states and their agents make decisions to select which religions to study and which ones to neglect. Inevitably, it is a process that enfranchises some religions' cultural capital over others (Apple and Christian-Smith 1991).

Another factor worth considering regarding the way other religions vis-à-vis Christianity are treated is that since the introduction of multi-faith RE, there has never been teacher in-service/reskilling training to equip them with approaches to deal with multiple religions in the classroom when traditionally Christianity (i.e. Bible Knowledge) has been the only religion taught in RE (see also Matemba 2011a). As we found in Malawi, according to one teacher:

No, never, I have never attended any in-service training since I started teaching RE and that is some ten years ago. I have never heard of an in-service workshop for RE. Teachers in the Sciences go for in-service and are confident, while as a subject, RE remains dormant (Malawi teacher 4).

When asked to comment on the government's financial limitations in supporting the new multi-faith RE, a government official confirmed the problem:

After finishing developing the syllabi, we struggled to provide funds to pilot test the syllabi, develop training manuals and provide training for teachers ... (Malawi education official 2).

Evidently, the absence of in-service training is a serious cause of concern that urgently needs to be addressed if some of the challenges facing multi-faith RE in Malawi and Ghana described in this article are to be overcome. In both countries, the problem of religious misrepresentation can perhaps be traced to the struggle over the meaning of the term 'RE'. The reason is that although in many ways RE has moved away, pedagogically, from *confessionalism* to *multi-faith education*, the subject has typically been associated with a Christian RE that is conceived in confessional terms (see also Baring 2011). The demonisation of non-normative religions (Hackeet 2003) and pre-definition of RE in Christian terms (even in what is supposed to be a post-confessional school environment) is problematic. Although evidently both countries have people belonging to different religions and some to 'none', in both countries the multi-faith RE curricula are restricted to three *prescribed* religions (Christianity, Islam and IR). Even here, Christianity is treated as *primus inter pares* in RE where schools use Christianity as the default pedagogical framework in classroom discourses. With a Christian majority in Ghana and Malawi and all the influences the Church (as a socio-political institution) has over individuals and the state (see Matemba 2011a), it is not too surprising that Christian dominance is observed in the curriculum and classroom discourse.

The misrepresentations of religions we identified can thus be explained as resulting from the politics of knowledge, questions related to power and knowledge and a selective tradition that privileges dominant groups to legitimize their knowledge while neglecting and marginalizing that of minorities (Apple 2000; Jackson 1997). What this means is that at an operational level, a Christian framework is naturally dismissive of 'other' religions as having competing truth claims—which they have. From relevant literature, we know that *inclusivism* (opposed to *exclusivism*), as a philosophical position for RE, is more open to the idea that while one's beliefs are non-negotiable, in truth, no one religion possesses *all* the truth. As such, other religions may offer something from which other religions can learn (Hobson and Edwards 1999). This does not mean that those who support the inclusivist position necessarily abandon the view that their own beliefs are supreme, *per se*, but rather that they are open to the idea that other people should be

given the space to express their religious views in education as well (see Brecht and Locklin 2016). Here, our view is that all religions have a right to exist and make a valuable contribution to the understanding of the divine.

## **Conclusion**

Today, we live in precarious times when extremist groups have hijacked religion, such as Islam, with tragic consequences, as the recent ISIS-fuelled terrorism in Europe, Al-Shabbab in Kenya and Somalia or Boko Haram in Nigeria acutely testify (Bayim 2015; Svensson 2007; Vittori *et al.* 2009). Thus, if religion in the classroom is to fulfil its *educational* objective as a subject of civic value towards citizenship in a multicultural world (see Gearon 2012), there is a need to ensure that classroom discourses reinforce democratic values such as tolerance and non-discrimination in a self-reflective way. In the words of Paul Vermeer, “educational confrontation” with otherness should enable students to be critical of their own religion as well that of others (Vermeer 2010, 113). As we have argued throughout this paper, the situation in Malawi and Ghana is far from this ideal. The content of instruction projects a new image, but it is still framed in the confessional approach. Consequently, students’ attitudes towards other religions barely change in spite of the learning experiences religious education offers. Moving forward, we believe an aggressive push for retraining and retooling of teachers, alongside a conscious agenda to facilitate inter/intra-religious dialogue in classrooms, could herald a new order of religious pluralism in classrooms across the African continent.

As shown in our findings, teachers and students were observed to be misrepresenting other religions owing to their own ideologies and biases. Here, we should emphasise that the purpose of multi-faith RE should be to challenge assumptions and inherent biases that both students and teachers may have about others’ religions. However, as experienced classroom teachers, we would be the first to admit that requiring teachers to present themselves as value-neutral objective persons is an exercise in futility. As humans, teachers are inherently biased, and their subjectivities would influence their engagement with the knowledge that is selected, for example, the choice of topics and choice of books (Causey *et al.* 2000). What we argue for is strengthened teacher pre-service and professional development programs that would help teachers acknowledge their subjectivities and work towards guarding them. It would make a big difference if RE teachers in sub-Saharan African could work towards religious disclosure (see Hess 2008) and create open-minded classroom environments that hinge on trust and respect for students and teachers alike. Apart from serving as a psychological check on teachers, students would be empowered to challenge misrepresentation of their religion without altercations.

We suggest that in this way, RE in both Malawi and Ghana can perhaps begin the necessary learning process for both teachers and students towards reinforcing inter-religious dialogue and not inter-religious hostility in the classroom. As others have also suggested (see Maitles and Gilchrist 2006), within the spirit of education for citizenship, classroom discourse in RE should give pupils a genuine say in determining not only what is learnt (material content) but crucially how that content is learnt (pedagogy). Given the contribution the subject can make towards citizenship, we suggest the setting up of a specific funded in-service project to provide teachers with new skills in dealing with multi-faith RE. However, in order to deal effectively with the issues highlighted in this article, there is need for a paradigm shift in the way the RE curriculum in both Malawi and Ghana is conceptualised and implemented in practice, but admittedly at the risk of protest from powerful Christian lobby groups and of being constrained by resource implications for teacher education and in-service reskilling.

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